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THAI POLITICS IN TRANSITION
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THAI POLITICS IN TRANSITION

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Until quite recently, Thailand has been a remarkably stable and peaceful developing nation in a region that has seen chaotic change since the end of World War II. Like the other nations in Southeast Asia, Thailand has been in an accelerating process of transition, but it had escaped the disruptions that have plagued the others. The cohesion of Thai society, a confident nationalism unshaken by colonial rule, and a particular skill in blunting or accommodating external threats have all contributed to easing the adjustment to modernization -- an adjustment further facilitated by rising prosperity and generally tolerable economic conditions.

But in 1973, internal and external strains severely challenged the old order. Growing social and economic problems and the sudden political awakening of the Thai student community generated strong pressures for a more open political system. External developments -- the implications of detente and the need for new international accommodation and ties -- further highlighted the need for change.

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The regime's overreaction to student demonstrations in October 1973 was its ultimate undoing. And as the leaders, Generals Thanom and Praphat, went into exile, a civilian-run parliamentary system struggled into being. This shift represented no crisp break with the past, however; traditional interest groups remain powerful. But it has signalled the advent of new forces on the edges of Thai politics which seem bound eventually to demand a more aggressive role in the political arena.

Thailand has entered a more uncertain period of transition. It is in the process of abandoning the highly authoritarian system that prevailed since World War II. Yet it is far from certain that a more open, Western-style democratic system can be grafted onto the traditional, hierarchic Thai society. Thai serenity and confidence have been shaken by the confluence of several trends: the ebb of American power and interest in the area has undermined the foundations of Thailand's post-war foreign policy and raised the spectre of a greater communist threat; the strains of growing economic problems; the political impact of the erosion of traditional values and tolerances by the influx of foreign (largely American) influence.

This paper, a distillation of a research study, "Thai Politics in Transition," attempts to identify major elements of stability and disequilibrium in Thailand today, and to suggest how these forces will affect Thailand's politics as well as its relations with the US.

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Factors for Stability

History, tradition, and the locus of real power all work to moderate the pace of change and keep it quite peaceful.

A Traditional Polity - Politics in Thailand have been typical of traditional societies -- authoritarian, elitist, personalized -- but largely free of many of the pressures that have generated unrest in other developing nations. The pacific tenets of Buddhism, the absence of colonial rule which might have bred radical dissent, and the delayed impact of modernization all contributed to a stable society, largely indifferent to the political leadership. The military's long domination of the leadership has rarely been challenged -- its hold on power reinforced by the financial gains such power has attracted. Civilian political forces have been fragmented and undisciplined -- their efforts weakened by disunity, by their often fractious and irresponsible behavior, and by implicit threats from Thailand's Communist neighbors which seemed to require a stronger hand at the helm.

The Real power still lies with the Army - Despite its reduced political role, its interests cannot yet be seriously challenged by any civilian leader wishing to stay in office. For the moment, the Army is willing to stay in the background. Military leaders have found they can

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protect their interests through alliances within the system, and have been reassured, moreover, by this government's tough stand against labor and student radicals. Though many in the military remain skeptical, they appreciate the broad public identification with the new constitution and they are reluctant to be held directly responsible if parliamentary government fails.

The King is an important stabilizing factor in the Thai political equation. His active role during and immediately after the fall of the military regime enhanced his prestige, though he has since retreated to a position more aloof from day-to-day politics. While the King had long pushed for moderate reforms, a new constitution, and a return to representative government, he has become disenchanted with the student activists he once encouraged and is disturbed by the signs of instability and incipient radicalism generated by the new political climate. Nonetheless, he has the potential for effective intervention in an immediate, short-term crisis and could again be valuable in defusing a dangerous situation.

The new Prime Minister, Khukrit Pramot, is a moderate reformist in an otherwise overwhelmingly conservative Cabinet. His power base is limited, but his political skills and the absence of an alternative as widely acceptable reinforces his position, and he has been able to maneuver some progressive legislation past his colleagues and through

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the Assembly. Other Cabinet members, such as Defense Minister Praman Adireksan, are clearly more interested in preserving the traditional system that has served their own interests so well.

Especially in foreign affairs, the civilian bureaucracy now speaks with a stronger voice. Its long subordination to military policy-makers is over, and it senses an opportunity to seize the initiative and press for reform. In the Foreign Ministry, an aggressive reformist element is arguing forcefully for a more decisive break with past policies. Much of the drive behind Thailand's openings to China and more cautious approaches to North Vietnam has come from this element which advocates a general loosening of ties to the US and the adopting of a more neutral foreign policy. This group is not anti-American and desires the continuance of close political ties with the US; but its members have concluded that Thailand must come to terms with the new realities of detente and the diminished American interest in the region.

This position has its challengers. As the shock of the sudden Communist victories in Indo-China has worn off, the government has begun to move in new directions more judiciously -- its caution undoubtedly reinforced by the Cabinet's conservative complexion and by the military's concern about diminished American military aid. There nonetheless appears to be a rough consensus within the government that Thailand needs to broaden its diplomatic options.

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Disequilibrating Factors

The idea of structural pressure groups outside the official bureaucracy is still alien to the Thai. But the rising level of political consciousness has generated growing political activity among students, labor, and farmers. Since the fall of the Thanom regime, the more visible activists have grown increasingly leftist and now form the core of the emerging radical movement in Thai politics. While the protest movement has attracted the interest of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), the party's long ideological preoccupation with peasant insurgency has left the Thai communists in the position of belatedly trying to associate with movements whose direction they do not control and whose internal workings they do not really understand. Nonetheless, increasing penetration undoubtedly will be seen.

Student pressure has been diluted by factionalism and by threats of retaliation from the rightists, but it can still coalesce around popular issues and plays an influential, if inconstant, role in Thai politics. The students' effectiveness at any time, however, depends on the degree of student unity and public support behind the issue at hand. Nationalistic feelings continue to be a strong factor in student protests, and often translate into anti-American campaigns.

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As long as US military forces remain in Thailand, they are a natural target for student protest. But strong and growing economic nationalism is likely to pose even more nettlesome problems for any Thai government.

Organized labor may someday become an effective political force. But union organization is in an infant stage, and the labor movement simply has neither the size nor cohesion to be a major power broker nor even an effective political instrument for others to manipulate. Labor's resistance to such manipulation may not be easily shaken. It is reinforced by the recent success of wildcat strikes and no doubt by the government's tough stand against the activities of radical labor leaders. Moreover, these radicals seem to threaten institutions the workers still identify with -- the King, religion, the established social order -- and offend the beliefs of people who still reflect their rural origins. Serious economic hardship could undermine this attitude, but as long as the government is reasonably responsive to labor's demands, protest activity is likely to focus more on job-related, rather than political, issues.

Signs of discontent among farmers -- the traditional bedrock of the country's conservatism and stability and primary target of communist organizers -- are more troubling to the government. The insurgency along Thailand's borders has long been in Bangkok as little more than a nuisance, but with communist victories in Indo-China there

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Is more concern that the insurgency may spread and more sensitivity to the beginnings of political organization among the farmers. Problems generated by farmers' increasing awareness of their relative poverty and neglect have not reached critical proportions, and without the compelling pressure of a crisis, the government is unlikely to take effective remedial action.

The Short-Term Outlook

At least for the moment, the new political system appears to be shaking down, and there are good prospects for a period of relative calm and stability. Prime Minister Khukrit has emerged a much stronger political leader than anticipated, and the earlier sense of drift and fragility has begun to give way to an atmosphere of greater confidence and direction. The incipient leftist movement is out of public favor and somewhat cowed by threats of rightist retaliation. Protest politics undoubtedly will continue but with greater restraint than was seen in the heady months following the military regime's demise. Moreover, unless conditions seriously deteriorate, a military coup is unlikely. Prolonged and violent unrest, a parliament hostile to the military's special interests, or a dramatically increased threat from North Vietnam would increase the chances of military intervention. But barring such pressures, the military is more likely to continue to accept a back seat --

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deferred by the knowledge that a military coup would undoubtedly provoke violence and bloodshed.

So far, there are no signs that a serious unraveling of the traditional socio-political fabric has begun. Thailand remains a deeply conservative society, and its problems are still within manageable bounds. Despite the obvious pressures for change that were growing in Thai society, the events of October 1973 were in many ways a fluke and one that did not change the basic ingredients of power in Thai political life. While new trends are discernible, Thai society has demonstrated a remarkable resilience under pressure and an ability to absorb new forces in a fashion that has modified their disruptive impact. Some Thais impatient with the pace of change will contribute to a growing radical element, but they are likely to remain more of a nuisance than a serious threat for some years because they lack a significant power base. Nonetheless, there is a general consensus in Thailand that some adjustments must be made -- the clock cannot be turned back -- and even the established elements of political power must accept new attitudes and new restraints.

Longer-term Uncertainties

Despite good prospects for a period of relative political stability, any prediction as to the longevity of civilian parliamentary government is hazardous. The underlying principles of representative

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government remain alien to most Thai, and the institutions and methods of democratic government will be difficult to preserve over the long run when there is little basic commitment to the conceptual underpinnings. There is widespread skepticism that democratic government can deal effectively with Thailand's problems. Many Thai look back with nostalgia on the placid and predictable days under Marshall Sarit, reflecting a longing for an era when Thailand's problems seemed simpler. As the complexities of Thailand's problems grow, so will impatience with debate and protest; arguments will be heard for firm, decisive and more authoritarian leadership.

Protest politics are an almost inevitable by-product of the Thai system, which generally ignores a problem until demonstrations have created a crisis atmosphere. Nevertheless, they are a disruptive factor in Thailand's still fragile effort to develop representative government. The political activists have aroused counter-action from the right which threatens to accentuate political polarization, laying the groundwork for a more dramatic and divisive impact on Thai politics. The spiraling rate of crime and banditry in Thailand has contributed to the public's growing aversion to the violence often attendant on protest politics. And considering the still considerable skepticism in Thailand that any democratic government can be effective, an unchecked growth of violence -- be it criminal or political -- can only increase the likelihood of a return to authoritarian rule.

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But not for a return to a narrowly-based military oligarchy. Despite the obvious discomfort with the free-wheeling aspects of Western democracy and the continuing force of an elitist/paternalist outlook, the Thais cannot dismiss the inexorable pressure for a more open system that is flexible enough to adjust to changing conditions. Former military regimes justified their monopoly of power in terms of national security -- an argument already less persuasive and one that is likely to remain subordinate to the increasing emphasis on social and economic reform. The days when a few generals could run the country for personal profit have given way to more complicated demands on the government that require the broader participation of civilian technocrats in the decision-making process. The civilians within the Thai elite have long considered themselves far more qualified to run the government than the more narrowly-educated military. They resented being shunted aside by Thanom and Praphat; they are enjoying their greater influence, and they would resist the re-establishment of a military dictatorship that denied them an effective role.

Economic problems may prove in time to be the principal catalyst of more basic and disruptive changes in the Thai political fabric, unless the government can effect some basic reforms to re-distribute income more evenly. It will be difficult to make significant

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headway toward economic reform in face of the well-entrenched vested interests of the Thai elite. Moreover, the government will attract blame for problems generated by international economic ills beyond its control. Urban-rural competition over food prices will no doubt intensify with the farmers continuing to get the short end of it -- and the persistence of rural poverty, the gap between those conditions and urban standards, and the farmers' growing awareness of being neglected can only stimulate frustrations with the existing political process.

Thus, regardless of the formal structure of the government in the years ahead, it will have to respond in some fashion to pressures from the new elements that have entered the fringes of political activity. Student and labor activists, and other reformist elements in business, the intelligentsia and the new political parties have been energized by the re-introduction of parliamentary government. While their influence probably will remain marginal for a long time, they will resist foreclosure and will be a continuing thorn in the government's side.

In sum, Thailand is something of a paradigm of a society in transition. It cannot retreat to the old system of military rule which proved unable to cope with the growing complexity of problems, yet the conservative establishment that runs the government is not willing to open up the political system and lose its perquisites. The coming

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years will see a major test of the basic cohesion of Thai society and of its traditional ability to adapt in the face of change.

Implications for the US

The US can no longer take Thailand for granted. The reintroduction of a civilian government requires changes in methods of doing business with the Thai because easy access to a few key military leaders who could make quick decisions relatively insulated from political pressures has given way to more tedious and often — frustrating approaches through lengthier bureaucratic channels. Moreover a government more exposed to public scrutiny and obliged to be more sensitive to public opinion (however narrowly represented it may be in Thailand) will be less accommodating.

The basic shift in Thai foreign policy did not spring from the collapse of military rule, but from Thai perceptions of a changing international environment. While the reformists in the MFA are impatient with the slow pace of Thailand's adjustment, the military and the conservative political leaders would prefer to move more slowly and cautiously. Nevertheless the direction and goals of Thai foreign policy are generally agreed upon. In view of those shared perceptions of Thailand's vulnerability and needs, it seems likely that any government in the near future, including another military regime will demand more of a quid pro quo in its dealings with the US

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and be less willing to place overwhelming reliance on a close bilateral relationship.

In practical terms, this suggests a more independent and sometimes an adversary position in international forums, such as the UN, as Thailand seeks to dissolve the image of client state and assume a protective coloring more acceptable to the communist neighbors with whom she must now coexist. Regional relations will take increasing priority. Moreover, with the diminished importance of the military alliance, economic problems undoubtedly will become the prevalent issues in Bangkok's relations with the US, especially in light of the importance of foreign investment to Thailand's economic growth.

There is growing sentiment that the nation's resources must be protected from excessive foreign exploitation -- a sentiment not held exclusively by the left. Economic nationalism is not likely to assume extreme proportions, however, because ties between the business community (particularly the banking community), the conservative and moderate parties, and senior military establishment are intimate if not incestuous, and their interests are bound to prevail over those of the more vocal protest groups. A civilian regime bidding for political support cannot escape some vulnerability to such protest groups, however, and coupled with the nationalistic predilections of the bureaucracy and the leadership, the Thai are sure to be more

restrictive as to the terms and areas of future foreign investments, even as they seek it.

The independent direction Thai foreign policy now seems to be taking could always veer, of course, if conditions changed. If, for example, there were a dangerous upswing in Thailand's persistent but still narrowly contained insurgency as the result of dramatically-increased foreign support, the arguments for maintaining a more intimate alliance with the US would be more compelling. The military undoubtedly would demand a more decisive role either within the constitutional system or by casting it aside. Even under these circumstances, however, if the American response were not reassuring, the Thai government -- be it civilian or military, democratic or authoritarian -- would probably begin to more earnestly seek accommodations with Hanoi and even closer ties with other great powers.

This sort of threat does not appear likely to develop in the near future, however. Hanoi's problems at home seem to be absorbing most of its energies, and its diplomatic tone suggests some desire for a cooling off period in foreign relations. Thai political developments and the policies growing out of them are thus more likely to be governed by domestic pressures than by threatening external exigencies; their march toward more neutral ground is likely to be at a measured pace rather than a panicky rout.

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In sum, future Thai policy is highly likely to be more independent with occasional anti-US overtones, more nationalistic and less accommodating to the US. Only a strong military threat from its communist neighbors that was met by an effective US response would reverse this trend.

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